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THE WHOLESALE

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AND

OUR RELATION TO IT.

BY

JOHN WILSON
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THE WHOLESALE, AND OUR RELATION TO IT.

The object of these conferences and papers is not, I presume, to display or to hear mere literary ability. If that were the end sought we could attain it by staying at home with book in hand holding converse with some favourite author. Our purpose is a higher one than that. We meet, papers are read, and discussions take place, in order that some practical good may result—that by the rubbing together of our thoughts some common and acceptable idea may be formed which may give impetus and stability to our movement. If this be not our aim; if we seek not this end, then spend we our strength for nought, and our labour is vain. Whatever ornament there may be about the paper, however beautifully it may be embellished by the flowers of rhetoric, and its sentences balanced and harmonised, yet it is but as sounding brass and tinkling cymbal; the voice of the speaker as one who singeth a pretty song; and while those who hear may be pleased, they will not be (the cause will not be) profited if it do not incite thought, impel us forward some little way, and weaken in some measure the forces which oppose us.

The Wholesale is the natural outgrowth of the distributive system. Co-operation is a development, and this is the next step forward; but to take that step there is a great deal of hesitancy. We are held back by motives which are not in strict accord with the aims of co-operation. Like timid bathers on the brink of the river, realising the benefit resulting from the bath, we hesitate to enter. In my opinion, if the truth of the proverb, "Delays are dangerous," was ever properly applied it is in the procrastinating of co-operative stores *re* the joining of the Wholesale. Delay gives the private dealers time and opportunity for arranging their business tactics, and, by the aid of their guerilla company prolonging the war between competition and co-operation, individualism and general good. During late years trade had massed itself. Centralisation is the order of the day. Since the establishment of the co-operative store this phase of commercial life has assumed great proportions. If the people had joined the stores at the commencement that would have been prevented. But to compete with the movement men wise in their generation have spread out their business places. If the stores had joined (as a common-sense view of the genius of co-operation would have led us to join) the Wholesale, a number of the

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gigantic concerns, whose travellers, with their neatly-done-up parcels—their glib tongues, used, as special pleaders can use them, not at all times with due regard to accuracy; and their plausible—but in many cases unreal—appearances, would never have been in existence; or if they had they would have died of inanition. Delay in taking this advance is a violation of the law of our being. No man, society, or nation can continue who does that. All must observe and conform to the peculiar laws adapted to their existence, or suffer the penalty. The law of co-operation is progress. We cannot stand still. The flow of the ocean maintains its sweetness; without that it would stagnate and putrify. If we stand still we shall die. Our power is the result of action. Our unity can only be sustained by moving. If we would live we must grow. Routine, settling down into a dull sedateness may be pleasant, and for the time being, is so, no doubt, but it is like the delusive pleasantness which sets in when a person is on the point of freezing to death. In that very pleasantness lieth the wasting of the vitality, the result being the extinction of life.

It may be said that we are progressing when we are starting stores in the villages. With pride we point to the increase in this direction, and to the augmentation of our numbers. That is granted. The legitimacy of the pride is admitted. The proof of numbers is accepted to a certain point. These stores are essential, and the increase in numbers necessary; but they are only means to an end. We should never forget that co-operation aims at something beyond the mere starting of stores, or enrolling names on a list; something greater than the bare cheapening of goods, and something nobler than making our money go further than it otherwise would. It was never intended for those ends alone. The man or society who thinks it is adapted for nothing more, and is willing to rest satisfied with that attainment, moves on a low level, and has never entered into the spirit of the movement. They are simply a species of camp followers, gathering spoil without fighting for it. Our stores are, in too many cases, competitive concerns. There exists in them a commercial rivalry as keen as—and oft no purer than—that between other traders. If we would be co-operators in its true sense, we must be consistent and orthodox in our creed, we must go forward joining hands and uniting interests at the Wholesale, simplifying the machinery of trade, and pruning the commercial tree of all its parasitical and dead branches. To stop where we are and merely hunt for dividend, is to declare our selfishness—a passion which co-operation knows nothing of, nor claims the smallest affinity with.

We shall realise our relation to the Wholesale if we consider the articles of the co-operative creed; if we ascertain what are its aims the evils which gave it birth and against which it has in part contended and which it must utterly destroy, or fall short of its goal. Considering this creed, ascertaining those aims, discerning those evils, then submitting our mode of dealing in our respective stores to a candid criticism, we shall be able to tell with accuracy whether we are doing our duty or not. A belief in this creed, a conformity to this standard, a desire to accomplish those

aims, and a zeal for the destruction and removal of those evils form the measure to which we must come. By these shall all men know that we are true co-operators. Not everyone who says we have made a penny in the £ higher dividend, without regard to the means used or the business connection formed shall enter into the spirit of commercial reform, and the mental and moral elevation of men which co-operation seeks. There may be a shade higher dividend, but speaking from the teachings of the co-operative gospel—measuring ourselves by its ethics—there may be, there often is, a dereliction of duty.

What then were and are now the objects of co-operation? They may be divided into two classes—those which might result from simple distributive co-operation, and those which it will need the larger and more advanced concern like the Wholesale to accomplish. Resulting from the simple store we have :—

1. The teaching of self-reliance amongst the people.

2. Inciting to thrift and the abolition of the credit system, which is like a millstone hung round the neck of the labouring class.

3. The establishing of a system in which every person would pay their own debts and no other, which was not done under the old mode of dealing. The honest purchaser being made to pay for the bad debts of those he dealt with by being charged a higher price for the goods bought.

As results of the more advanced phase of the movement we may expect :—

1. The procuring of unadulterated goods.

2. The destruction of the fierce competition in trade, and the substitution of a more generous and humanitarian system, thus producing the maximum amount of prosperity by the minimum amount of friction.

3. The removal of the large, costly, and unnecessary army of middlemen, and the prevention of waste in labour and goods which is taking place in useless work and excessively large stocks kept in rival establishments.

4. The bringing about of the union of capital and labour by establishing productive concerns, where the conflicting parties, employer and employed, will be identified, and the profits of one be the gain of the other.

5. To increase the number of hands into which the augmenting wealth of the country may fall; and to scatter the mounded heaps until they lie in more righteous although less portions "o'er the land."

These are some of the aims of co-operation. There are others lying at convenient distance to all who are willing to be taught, but in these we have sufficient for our own purpose. Let me say their realisation is a long way off if we are determined to be so many "Hal o' the Wynds," fighting each for our own hand, and for our special dividend. They are nigh at hand if we lose sight of our individualism, and broaden our aspirations beyond our own store. I crave your indulgence until I assign my reasons for asserting this.

First, purity in goods can only be effected by removing that which makes impurity possible, viz., the desire to undersell. In proportion to

the keenness of the struggle by commercial men for the orders, will we find the end gained justify the means used. There is adulteration in goods; who will say it is confined to the retail dealer? That which is practised in the petty shop is insignificant compared with that in the manufacturing concern. The impurity of water lies not in the tap whence we draw it. The cause of it is more remote. The impurity of goods in general commences not at the dispensing shop. It takes its rise amid the trickeries of the manufactory, and the false representations and mixings of the wholesale dealer. There needs no printed books to teach us that. We are made acquainted with it by the glaring inconsistency between the gloss on the cloth and its shoddy construction, the polished appearance of the well-got-up boot or shoe, and the material composing it; the beautiful and ornamental package, and the mixture it contains. There is no inducement to adulterate in a store. There is no individual gain in falsely representing. No interest in using chicanery, finesse, or flattery. There is none in the "Wholesale." Its community of interest shuts out the bare possibility of it. "Nobody wants to cheat himself, and the temptation to dishonest practices are withdrawn."

Let us notice our contention against competition. With that co-operation is in duty bound to do battle. We avow that, even where our profession is contradicted by our practice. In theory we are condemners of the system, but some of us are led into a violation of duty by the lure of a slight increase in dividend. Outside we may find a demur to the belief in the evils of competition. The political economist may tell us that competition is a blessing, and the regulator of industrial action, and that it is as regular in its operation as the mechanism of the heavens. An all-combining, all-balancing, and all-benefiting arrangement. Over against this book teaching we set the political economy of the street and the workshop; and in every busy street, lane, and crowded court, amid the squalid homes of our miserably-paid slop makers, the Bethnal-green match makers, or the seamstress who, with her weary eye and monotonous stich, stich, finds material for the "Song of the Shirt;" in the scanty wages of the labourer in mine, factory, forge, and shop; and the deep anxiety for an existence where all might live in plenty if not in luxury. In the struggling, starving workers of London and our large cities and towns, to whom the face of nature is only an impression of memory, a glimpse of the sun or a touch of his rays a casualty, and a moment's relaxation from their round of unremitting toil a something beyond the bounds of their temporal horizon, contained for them only in the quiet of a pauper's coffin and grave. In these we find the declaration that "at the present time our commercial pursuits are carried on upon two principles—unlimited competition and unrestricted rivalry, the only struggle with a man of wealth being how to make more of it," and we realise a need there is for a higher and a better doctrine. But how to prevent this state of things? How can we remove these blots from our civilisation and Christianity? How can we lighten this dark lot in many—too many—lives? These questions demand from co-operators a direct

answer. Can we give it if we maintain, uphold, feed these very manufactories where the wages paid to the workmen are a disgrace? The only true answer, the only safe course, lies in a co-operative union for the removal and a leaving behind of the competitive system.

Take the large number of middlemen and the large crowded places they represent. As a nation we groan beneath the weight of these and all their concomitant evils; and yet a number of our stores are favoured fortnight after fortnight, or at stated periods, by a visit from a number of these kind, attentive gentlemen, forgetting that they must pay for the attention. The system is a species of white elephant, which the private dealers make our committees a present of; but whose fattening is outrageously expensive. The only redeeming features in this infatuated action are the samples left by the travellers, and which in many stores are grasped and taken away by committee-men with as much avidity as a wrecker takes his ill-gotten prize. To lay ourselves open to the visits of these men, to maintain this branch of useless labour, to keep up this robbery of unproductive idleness, is not only absurd, but it is highly injurious. Every superfluous hand engaged in an unnecessary work is a tax upon the public. All taxes fall eventually upon the producer; therefore we are imposing burdens upon ourselves. Relieve these men from this needless business, and they would be free to devote their energies to the production of wealth. They would be creators and not destroyers. The simpler we make our commercial machinery the nearer we bring consumer and producer, the better for the people. It behoves us then to devote ourselves to the perfection of that simplicity, and the shortening of the distance between the two points. In the "Wholesale" we have that simplicity. In it we have a daysman who can lay his reconciling hand on both, and bring them into friendly, profitable contact, without the intervention of the expensive complicated system many of us cling so tenaciously to, and uphold with such loss to our cause.

Let us consider the union of capital and labour, and consequently the equable sharing of the wealth produced. To my mind, the Wholesale offers the only certain means of speedily, and effectually, establishing productive co-operation. With truthful dealing on the part of the stores, and with the Wholesale as a centre, production in anything can be started to-morrow. We have money, we possess the skill, honesty on our part would furnish a sure market. With these, where is there a power that can prevent us? If a productive concern has to meet the competition of the large centres of trade already started, those gigantic industries whose ramifications are everywhere, its existence is precarious and struggling; but having a number of stores bound together by the ties of interest and good intention, who have more regard for quality than cheapness, who can see the shivering form of the underpaid workman looming up behind the low-priced goods, then success is certain, and duration permanent and beneficial.

But beyond these aims there is an incidental one. Having a complete union of stores connected to the Wholesale, as we would have our mem-

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bers to our stores—not going to the tea shop because they could save penny in the £—we would establish a very desirable harmony and unif mity of feeling in each co-operative district, and prevent that selfi migration which takes place amongst those of our members who a nothing more than dividend-hunters—sharers in prosperity more th prosperity makers.

There remains nothing now but to offer a word of exhortation. This needed even to the best of us. Something more than the bare recordi of our names to swell the roll of members is required. We must ha consistency and entirety in dealing. If we examine the Wholesa balance sheet we shall find that in many cases our trading is not on pri ciple but convenience. The purchases at the Wholesale are small co pared with the total amount of our buyings. This difference arises fro low, money-making desires. Let us remember that we have a higher, nobler aim before us. Our aspirations should therefore be beyond t mere loaves and fishes of life. We have not only to alleviate the pover and pauperism in our midst, but we have to erase them entirely; to ma them impossible by removing their causes. Let us not be dazzled by t gleams of our present successes, these are but the victories of mere ou posts compared to the great conquest which lies before us. The gre prompter of life is emulation, the desire to excel. Let this desire move u onward and upward. Let us not be mean enough to claim a mere nomin relation to the "Pioneers" but an affinity of spirit and self-denial. The we fare of the masses is their own business. It is their work to remove the vas compact mass of poverty and ignorance. The task may seem great, bu its accomplishment is sure. We may think progress slow, but it is no by the hand of man that societies are born in a day. The habits o society are hard to change; but if we have faith in our work, are im pelled forward by a hatred to all wrong and oppression, and a sympath for the downtrodden, we shall, by the spirit of our movement reduce chaos to harmony, and transform the social darkness t a life-blessing light. Let us preach this higher and better doctrine "We want," as Mr. Cowen has said, "to make men citizens; w preach the doctrine of brotherhood and fellowship, we wish to proclaim a new gospel, to hasten the time when the fierce competition in which we are now engaged will be weakened, and men will live together not as mere rivals in trade, but as citizens in a community of common interests." Let me conclude in the words of Mazzini, with an alteration of the personal pronoun, "We were first slaves, then serfs; now we are hirelings. We have emancipated ourselves from slavery and from serfdom, why should we not emancipate ourselves from the yoke of hire, and become free producers and masters of the totality of production which we create?"

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